

DISCUSSION NOTE

AUTONOMY AS SOCIAL INDEPENDENCE: REPLY TO WEIMER

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I defend my pure social account of global autonomy from Steven Weimer's recent criticisms. In particular, I argue that it does not implicitly rely upon the very kind of nonsocial conception of autonomy that it hopes to replace.

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1. Introduction

In 'The Autonomous Life: A pure social view', I defend an account of global autonomy according to which an agent is autonomous to the extent to which she is resistant to subjection to foreign wills. I argue that this *dispositional* property of resistance to interpersonal subjection is conferred by various *base* properties, which I call 'autonomy traits', and that these include many of the standard conditions of autonomy, such as a capacity for critical reflection, a sense of self-worth, and protection from coercion. Moreover, whilst the list of autonomy traits is potentially endless, I suggest that agents require only some set of traits sufficient to push them over the threshold of social independence necessary to qualify as globally autonomous; the aim of an account of global autonomy, as I see it, is to specify such a package of traits that is both feasible and independently valuable.

This account, which interprets the idea of self-rule in a negative, social sense as requiring resistance to the rule of others, is intended as an alternative and rival to traditional accounts of autonomy that interpret the idea of self-rule as rule by some form of rational or authentic self. In 'Autonomy as Rule by the Self', Steven Weimer defends the latter approach. He first objects to the theoretical flexibility of my view, arguing that any plausible version of it must require that autonomous agents possess at least some 'internal' traits, such as critical rationality or integrity. He then gives three reasons for thinking that the best explanation of the necessity of these traits must appeal to their role in establishing some form of 'self-ruling "I"' [2014: 162], thus concluding that my account implicitly relies on the very idea of autonomy as rule by the self that I claim to reject. These reasons are (1) that positing such a self best explains why irrational people lack autonomy, (2) that it explains why irrational people cannot be made more autonomous through the acquisition of merely external traits, and (3) that appeal to such a self is already implicit in my account of subjection to a foreign will.

Whereas (1) and (2) rely on intuitions that I reject, (3) does not, and so I begin with that.

2. Subjection to a Foreign Will

My account of subjection to a foreign will includes both a *reasonable resistance* condition, according to which I am not subject to your will if I can be reasonably expected to resist your influence, and a *conformity of wills* condition, according to which I am not subject to your will if I would endorse your intention to influence me were I to know of it [2014: 145-7]. Of these conditions, Weimer writes:

The two aspects of an agent's identity most commonly identified as the self-ruling 'I' on the understanding of autonomy Garnett rejects—the reflective capacities exercised by freely made choices and the sanctioning attitudes involved in endorsing influences—are thus accorded a power that no other autonomy traits possess . . . This is easily explained on the understanding of autonomy as rule by the self: it is because the relevant capacities and attitudes partially constitute the agent's self-ruling 'I' that when *they* take ownership of an influence, *the agent* can be understood to have taken ownership of that influence . . . On Garnett's account, however, there is no principled basis for according this influence-authorizing power to these specific traits. After all, he could have just as easily bestowed that power upon agent-external traits.¹

[2014: 163]

Take the conformity of wills condition, which perhaps seems most vulnerable to this criticism. The basic idea is this: if you intend to get me to do something, then (other things equal) your intention is foreign to me, but your intention can be rendered relevantly non-foreign to me by virtue of its conformity or alignment with my own will. Importantly, all references to 'me' and 'my own will' are here understood only in their broad, shallow senses; that is, those senses 'in which everything is attributable to me that occurs in my conscious life or figures in the best overall explanation of my conscious life and behaviour' [Scanlon 2002: 170]. Thus the conformity of wills condition is intended to presuppose no more than a basic and minimal conception of agency [c.f. Garnett 2013: 23; Weimer 2014: 160].

This means, for instance, that if Betty hides Jane's car keys in order to prevent her from driving while drunk, and if Jane drunkenly rails against this interference, then she is, on this account, subject to Betty's foreign will at this time. This is the case even if she would endorse Betty's relevant intention when sober. It does not matter to the analysis that her failure to endorse Betty's intention is here irrational or not her 'true' or 'authentic' attitude. All that matters is that Betty's will is now relevantly foreign to Jane—in the broad and shallow sense of 'Jane'—and that Jane is subject to

¹ Just to clarify: since I partly define the idea of an autonomy trait in terms of the reasonable resistance and conformity of wills conditions, I do not treat these conditions themselves as autonomy traits. An autonomy trait is a property that confers on an agent an increased tendency not to be subject to foreign wills; the two conditions are parts of an account of what it is to be subject to foreign wills.

it. This is intended to capture the fact that there is something *prima facie* significant—namely, self-rule or self-direction—being denied to Jane, however justifiably, in her present state (more on this below).

Thus the conformity of wills requirement may be read as stating that attitudes that are literally and shallowly yours are relevantly foreign to me, unless they conform with attitudes that are literally and shallowly mine. Their conformity with anything else—anything external to me (in the shallow sense of ‘me’)—does not render them non-foreign to *me* (again, in the shallow sense of ‘me’). *This* is why agent-external factors cannot have ‘influence-authorising power’.

In this way, my account of subjection to a foreign will rests on some ordinary and uncontroversial ideas about which mental attitudes are literally mine and which are literally yours. It does not, however, presuppose the familiar ‘deep’ framework of identification and alienation integral to standard accounts of autonomy. Hence I need not appeal to endorsement by ‘*the agent*’ (in the deep, italics-worthy sense) of influences by means of capacities constitutive of its ‘self-ruling “I”’; I need only appeal to endorsement by the agent (in the simple, shallow sense). So while my account, like all accounts of autonomy, presupposes a basic account of agency (autonomy being, after all, a property of agents), it does not presuppose any particularly deep or sophisticated account of agency.

3. Autonomy, Insanity, and the Good

I turn now to Weimer’s other two reasons for thinking that my account must ultimately rest on a more traditional, rule-by-the-self view of autonomy. Both stem from a clash of intuitions concerning agents that are insane or highly irrational. According to Weimer, first, such agents lack autonomy regardless of their degree of immunity to interpersonal subjection; second, increases in such agents’ immunity make no difference to their autonomy [2014: 162]. According to me, by contrast, irrationality need be no bar to autonomy (though it generally is one in fact). On my view, it is conceptually possible for a profoundly irrational agent to live an adequately autonomous life, so long as her irrationality does not render her socially vulnerable—that is, so long as she is well protected, embedded in caring relational networks, and supported in pursuing her own (irrational) ends.

Unfortunately, the roots of this disagreement run too deep for easy resolution in a single discussion note. Nevertheless, I make the following brief points, beginning with a couple of clarifications. As should be clear, my view of autonomy is purely *procedural*, in that it places no restrictions at all on the possible content of an autonomous person’s beliefs and desires. This is a feature that it shares with many contemporary liberal accounts. Yet while most existing procedural accounts include some kind of ‘rational competence’ requirement [e.g. Christman 2009], mine does not, and this may appear a serious defect. Nevertheless, the distance between my account and the others in this matter may be smaller than it seems. This is because autonomy, as we have already noted, is a property of agents, and agency, in even its most basic sense, requires some minimal degree of rational intelligibility. So one cannot discuss the autonomy of a thing unless that thing is minimally rational. I need

not, therefore, deny that autonomy *presupposes* the minimum rationality required for agency.²

Next, recall that the idea of autonomy does a variety of jobs for us. One of them is to mark out actions that genuinely ‘speak for’ their agents in some normatively significant sense; this is, for instance, the notion typically at issue in discussions of valid consent, democratic legitimacy, and moral responsibility. As I explain in my original paper, however, this is *not* the notion that my account attempts to elucidate [Garnett 2014: 148-9; c.f. Weimer 2014: 161]. Hence the claim is not that profoundly irrational tokens of consent can be normatively transformative, or that the insane are to be held responsible for their actions. Instead, the account aims to elucidate autonomy in one of its other modes of employment, in which it serves to pick out a specific type of human good; namely, the good of being one’s own ruler and of directing one’s own life. The claim that insane or irrational people can be autonomous, then, is the claim that they can partake in this aspect of the good. That is, whatever *other* components of a flourishing human life such people lack—reason, health, happiness—they need not *also* lack the ability to live their own lives in their own ways. Of course, the mentally ill are often especially vulnerable to interpersonal domination, and so tend to lack autonomy in fact. But there is no *principled* reason why they, too, cannot enjoy the good of a life lived on their own terms.

That is the claim; why accept it? Two reasons. First, it helps us to a more nuanced understanding of some of the moral complexity surrounding our treatment of the mentally ill. It helps to make vivid, for instance, the fact that when we coercively commit a person to a psychiatric institution, we deny her one aspect of the good, namely her ability to live her life in her own way. This is a good that we *sacrifice*—though typically with great justification, given the value of the other goods (such as physical safety, or the eventual return to reason) for which it is traded. Denying that the mentally ill can be autonomous, by contrast, prevents us from seeing *any* such trade-off, and so impoverishes our moral understanding of these cases. In a similar vein, my account helps to show how giving psychiatric patients some limited say in their treatment can serve to partially reconnect them with the particular good of self-determination; again, denying that they are capable of autonomy blinds us to this potential feature of such policies.

Second, in insisting that those whom we judge to be irrational or insane are incapable of autonomy we undermine the role that the idea of autonomy is designed to play in our political thought. One of the main purposes of the concept, at least in the liberal tradition, is to help to carve out a protected space in our thinking for misfits, eccentrics and others who fail to conform to our shared norms. An autonomous life, as it is sometimes put, is one that marches to the beat of its own drum. We have other concepts (in particular, those of reason and morality) with which to evaluate the *quality* of an agent’s self-government; but a person, just like a state, may rule herself badly or madly, and rule herself all the same. If we miss this fact about autonomy, it seems to me, then we miss the main point of the idea.

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² Note, though, that I *do* deny that autonomous agents need be any more rational than non-autonomous agents. The point is simply that both kinds of agent might necessarily possess a minimum degree of rationality just by virtue of being agents.

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